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*INVISIBLE VIOLENCE:
UNDERSTANDING AND
RECONCEPTUALIZING
THE SPACE OF THE
U.S. - MEXICO BORDER*

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The Sonoran Desert near Tucson, Arizona during winter
by Santryl (2006)



Permanent drought in the Sonoran Desert, Mexico
by Tomas Castelazo



Saguaro National Park in the Sonoran Desert
by Joe Parks (2012)

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While in university, I would cross the United States-Canada border sometimes up to ten times a year. Each time, I would note exactly how long it took and marvel when I could pass through the strict, intimidating space of airport customs in under 15 minutes. For me, the border has a defined start and end and is merely a space to pass through. But for many people trying to enter the United States, this is not how they experience the space of the border. At the Southern United States border, the Sonoran desert has been weaponized through the implementation of the border policy known as prevention through deterrence, which renders the violence of the United States-Mexico border invisible. The extent of this border violence can be understood by reconceptualizing the border as a shifting and expanding entity that spans space and time.

Prevention through deterrence is a United States border policy implemented under President Bill Clinton in 1994 (Department of Homeland Security (DHS) 1994) and is still in place today. The policy concentrates surveillance on urban areas along the United States-Mexico border, which would typically be the safest places to cross the border illegally (Nasser and Hunt, 2018b). The policy forces “illegal entrants [to cross] through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border,” and acknowledges that these migrants would “find themselves in mortal danger” (DHS 1994, p. 2). Prevention through deterrence forces migrants to cross through the extreme environments of the Sonoran Desert in hopes that the harsh geography will slow them down and make them easier to apprehend, and possibly discourage them from attempting to cross the border at all (Nasser and Hunt, 2018b). Since 2000, prevention through deterrence has killed more than 3,200 people in the Arizona portion of the desert alone (Background — Undocumented Migration Project, 2021).

The 310, 800 square kilometres of the Sonoran desert span southwestern Arizona and southeastern California, and the Mexican states of Baja California Sur, Baja California, and Sonora (Sonoran Desert, 2020). Temperatures can reach up to 49 degrees Celsius and the environment receives small amounts of yearly rainfall (Sonoran Desert, 2020). The desert has been described as covered in sage brush and cacti, with red sand and lava flows (Nasser and Hunt, 2018a; Benanav, 2019). Within the desert there are several mountain ranges, valleys, and thorn forests (Sonoran Desert, 2020).

With prevention through deterrence, the strategic control of urban spaces is used to make it seem as if the violence inflicted on migrants is done by the land, allowing the government to avoid responsibility for the consequences of their policies. Shahram Khosravi (2010) questions society's acceptance of borders as natural to human existence. Khosravi (2010) claims that the use of natural barriers to designate borders normalizes state defined borders and allows borders to appear as "primordial, timeless, as part of nature" (2010, p. 1). The acceptance of the United States's use of prevention through deterrence relies heavily on this belief of borders as natural. If borders are natural, then weaponizing the desert and allowing migrants to die in their attempts to cross it appears less like a conscious choice enforced by government policy and more like the natural consequences of having and protecting a border. But we know for a fact that the government was aware of the deadly effects of prevention through deterrence and still chose to implement and enforce it anyway, as a 1997 report by the Government Accountability Office used the migrant death toll to measure the effectiveness of prevention through deterrence (Nasser and Hunt, 2018b). The lack of government responsibility contributes to keeping this violence mostly invisible to the general public.

Furthermore, the conditions of the desert help hide the violence, as bodies are not always found in identifiable condition, and often the fauna of the area will prey on the bodies, in some cases making it impossible to tell that someone had lost their life there at all (Verini, 2020; Nasser and Hunt, 2018b). The desert naturally eradicates evidence of death, making it easier for the American government to minimize the violence that occurs as a result of their policy, further hiding the violence from the media and general public. The space of the desert has been weaponized, and in doing so, the land renders the violence of this policy almost invisible.

The extent of the violence inflicted on migrants attempting to cross into the United States goes beyond the death and injury they are at risk of in

the Sonoran desert. To understand the depth of this violence, consider the border as a space that expands beyond the marker (or in some parts of the desert, the wall) that designates American land from Mexican land. The general American public might conceptualize the border the same way I do; a space with a defined beginning and end, intended to be passed through. For these migrants, the space of the border becomes the entirety of the Sonoran desert. Furthermore, if migrants are lucky enough to survive the desert crossing, the border space will expand to include the rest of their lives within its grasp. Though successfully leaving the desert may mean safety from physical peril, migrants who cross into the United States without permission will struggle to find housing, healthcare, and employment. They will live with the constant fear of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement coming to deport them. In many ways they will still be in their border crossing, not accepted as Americans or extended the same rights as one but unable to return to their former homes. The border will stretch across time and space to become a space they can never leave.

When the United States implemented prevention through deterrence in 1994, they did so knowing that people would lose their lives to the extreme conditions of the Sonoran desert. The government changed the space of the desert into a weapon, and ensured that the space of the border between the United States and Mexico was one of violence. The government has shifted responsibility for these lives and these deaths off themselves and onto the land, and in doing so, has made this border violence mostly invisible. To understand the depth and extent of this violence, the space of the border must be reconceptualized not as a space to pass through, but as one that expands and contracts based on who is held within it. For undocumented migrants entering the United States, there is no “crossing” the border, there is simply living or dying within it.

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